

6:30 P.M.

Former CIA Agent Defects

TOM JARRIEL: The CIA trained him, he used their escape techniques to elude the FBI, and today Edward Lee Howard turned up in Moscow, where he was given a safe haven. Howard was sought by U.S. authorities after it was learned he had told the Soviets all about U.S. intelligence gathering in Moscow. The secrets he betrayed are described as among the most damaging in recent years to American intelligence gathering in the Soviet Union.

We have two reports on the spy who got away. First, here's ABC's John Martin.

JOHN MARTIN: In Moscow the Soviet newspaper Izvestia reported this news: "Edward Howard, an American fugitive and former CIA officer, had been granted political asylum." The Soviet press agency Tass said, "Howard has stated that the motive for his request is that he has to hide from the U.S. secret services."

Edward Howard is wanted by the FBI for espionage, reportedly for betraying CIA operations in Moscow. Even though he was an acknowledged former drug user, the CIA hired him and revealed secrets to him, then fired him in 1983 when he failed a lie detector test. Later he moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he left this house at night last year, even though FBI agents had him under surveillance.

As a spy, Howard apparently told Soviet agents how the CIA avoided surveillance in Moscow and how it arranged to meet its informants. His spying was apparently revealed by the Soviet KGB defector Vitaly Yurchenko, who also reportedly identified Ronald Pelton, a National Security Agency

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employee convicted in June of spying for the Soviet Union. Yurchenko returned to the Soviet Union last year.

Since Howard allegedly began betraying CIA operations, five American Embassy personnel have been expelled from the Soviet Union, and a Soviet expert in technology is missing and may have been executed, according to some reports.

A former CIA official said the blame for this should be shared by agency officials.

GEORGE CARVER: That at least one person paid with his life for Howard's indiscretions. And that, to me, is criminal culpability on a number of people's part.

MARTIN: Intelligence sources have told ABC's John Scali the CIA decided to break contact with most of its Soviet informants, even though Howard only knew a few of them. It's not clear how much this damaged national security. But the irony tonight is that Edward Howard and the Soviet defector who reportedly betrayed him, Vitaly Yurchenko, may now be living in the same city, Moscow.

DENNIS TROUTE: This is Dennis Trout in Washington, where the CIA and the FBI were sharply criticized by the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board for their work in the Howard affair. FBI Director William Webster issued letters of reprimand to a handful of agents for mishandling the case. At the CIA, William Casey also reprimanded his operatives on the Howard case for failing to tell FBI counterparts who were trying to keep track of him that Howard was an espionage expert trained at slipping surveillance teams.

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The agency has also begun internal reforms, such as replacing the chief of the security section who oversees investigations of recruits. The CIA will closely scrutinize applicants for any with a history of drug or alcohol abuse.

The CIA no longer is firing unsatisfactory agents outright, but instead is giving them a cooling-off period before dismissal, so their information is outdated by the time they leave the agency.

Finally, counseling for dismissed agents is being reemphasized to lessen the chance that an embittered former employee will turn against the agency and reveal its secrets.

Curiously, intelligence sources say that's the one thing they did right in the Howard case, arrange psychiatric counseling for him after his dismissal from the CIA. Obviously, it didn't work. And experts say they don't expect a foolproof system, even with this additional reform.